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STREETS &  
SHADOWS

*by*  
*Mercedes de Acosta*



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**STREETS  
AND  
SHADOWS**

*By*  
MERCEDES de ACOSTA

MOODS  
ARCHWAYS OF LIFE  
STREETS AND SHADOWS  
WIND CHAFF  
(*A novel*)

# STREETS AND SHADOWS

BY

MERCEDES de ACOSTA



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NEW YORK  
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY  
1922

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1922

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To  
Vouletti Proctor Brown  
beloved and understanding  
friend,  
this volume is  
lovingly and gratefully  
dedicated.



*Acknowledgment is made to "Poetry: A Magazine of Verse," for permission to reprint some of the poems in this volume.*

"Then let me see you stand free and high up!"

Ibsen's "*Master Builder*."

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STREETS  
AND  
SHADOWS



## SONG OF FIFTH AVENUE

A LONG thin way  
Drawn like a thread through the heart of the  
city.  
Avenue of rich, of poor—  
Vibrating with color—  
Swaying with humanity  
Beating time with the pulse of Life,  
Suffocated by the pressure of Life,  
Crushed—trampled upon by streaming flows of  
Life.

Fifth Avenue!  
I will write your song in clatter and din,  
With tramping of feet,  
Endless, ceaseless noise.  
I will write your song in sorrow—joy,  
In birth—death,  
In creation—destruction,  
In beauty and ugliness.  
I will sing your song in spite of tradition,  
Careless of tradition.  
I will sing your song of creeds, of races  
Dissolved in one—  
I will sing your song  
In laughter—irony—despair.  
My music will come of all time,  
Reach all time—

As you have come of all time,  
Of all people;  
And with the slenderness of your body,  
The magic of your will—  
Have touched all people.

Washington Square—  
White arch rising like the ghost of people long  
    since dead;  
Memory of fragrant flowers—old laces—  
Sleigh bells and many traces  
Of beauty, love and dreams.  
Now only an arch, but a cross gleams  
On an old brown building.  
Washington Square—  
Symbol of the Past,  
Conceiver of the long thin thread  
Spun from out your heart.  
Now then take your part,  
Following up the blocks and years.

Watch the weary tramp  
Of sweat workers out for lunch;  
The emptying of buildings where homes once  
    stood;  
Swedes, Armenians, Slavs come pouring forth,  
Merging in the crowd midst stink and sweat,

Sucking in the air for one short hour.  
On the corner blooms a flower  
Carried in a basket by an Italian  
Pushed roughly by an Irish cop,  
Who calls them all  
“A bunch of stinking Yids.”  
Then further up I sing—  
Past great shops—great banks,  
Clothes of all description—  
Shoes, dresses, cloaks, stays,  
Jews, Gentiles press their ways  
Swarming cross the Avenue.  
And over all swings the flag.  
From shops with French, German, Italian  
names  
Hangs the Great American Flag!

Forty-second street—  
Like a strange automatic animal  
Opening wide his jaws,  
And to the tune of a sharp whistle  
Spitting forth great masses of Life.  
Millions of people rushing over the spine of  
the Avenue  
Calling the system “civilization.”  
While high up loom tall buildings,  
Where slender primeval trees once stood,

Bird songs filling the air instead of policemen's  
whistles.

But I have said I would sing of your beauty,  
too;

So I remember your magic at twilight,  
White buildings like winged birds flight,  
Flashing thousands of window eyes  
Like stars at night.

And the radiance of the sun

Across your face by day;

Dazzling colors—motors—green buses—

Life—life on its way

To death. A funeral passes,

A pauper begs, a child laughs out,

But like ants in long tall grasses,

They pass their way, no one heeding them.

Then churches—all creeds—

(Take your choice)

All spires point to the sky

All vainly try

To show us heaven.

While on the street

The beggars meet

And have no homes.

Then rich houses copied from foreign land;

French Chateaux, Italian palaces,  
While within great plates of glass stand  
Old master paintings looking out,  
Gazing solemnly on the new world.  
Then further up more rich houses.  
Homes of Jew bankers—rich politicians,  
All with too much food and gold,  
While sitting opposite in the park are old  
Worn out bums, tired of being hungry.  
Further up Mount Sinai Hospital,  
Chloroform fills the breeze  
While in the park from the trees  
The scent of flowers.  
Then further still “Nigger Town,”  
Black faces and brown  
Hang from windows and crowd the streets.

So the long thin thread stretches—  
Stretches—bends  
Then ends.

Fifth Avenue ends and so my song;  
But over its pavements the blood of Life  
Is flowing on!

## LITANY OF HANDS

HANDS—millions of hands  
Drawn across the brow of Life,  
Brushing away the sweat of Life,  
Or drooping listlessly by the side of Life.

Hands of dreamers—passive—white,  
Hands of scientists—knotted—steady,  
Hands of surgeons—strong—sure,  
Of poets—sensitive—frail,  
Hands of suicides—nervous—faltering,  
Of laborers—muscular—unfaltering,  
Proclaiming sometimes a lost child of genius.  
Hands of thieves—avaricious—sneaky;  
Hands that destroy flowers—cage wild things.  
Hands of children  
Groping—reaching into the future.  
Hands of old people—quiet—tired out,  
Weary of touching life  
Of upholding tumbling castles and dreams.  
Hands of traitors—extended—deceiving,  
Fingering everything with treachery and lies.  
Then magnetic hands—hands of healers,  
Of people who understand;  
Hands of compassion, of forgiveness,  
Hands that carry the burdens of the world  
Like the hands of Christ!

## “FOR RENT”

THERE is something terrible  
about houses marked “For Rent”  
and poor devils sleeping in the streets,  
and wanting homes.

I have never slept in the streets  
or in the parks,  
but if I do  
I hope I shall never see  
empty houses marked “For Rent,”  
because it might make me bitter,  
and hateful to my fellow creatures.

## NEW YORK

BUILDINGS endlessly high  
With skeletons of steel—  
Pointed—square—grotesque roofs—  
Thousands of windows  
Like chains of eyes  
Ever watchful—ever condemning.  
Long lines of avenues—  
Ugly straight streets—  
Brick—faded yellow and red—  
Stone—soiled white and brown—  
Flaming letters and signs over everything.  
Then noise—noise—noise—  
Clanking of street cars,  
Roaring of elevated trains,  
Throbbing of motors,  
Shuffling feet—  
People—people—people—  
Distorted congestion of humanity—  
But over all a hideous loneliness—emptiness—  
And everywhere—suffering . . . suffering . . .

## REST

You standing against the doorway—  
The boyishness of your slender figure  
Framed in the arch—  
Making a semi-halo around your head—  
Dragging out the shadows—  
Like the wings of fairy butterflies  
Across your face.

Then we two  
Entering into the house—  
The glowing firelight  
Leaping up to greet us—  
The intimacy of familiar things  
Crowding about us—  
Making our voices low—  
While lodging a tenderness in your eyes  
Creating another warmth within the room.

Then we turning low the lamps—  
Creeping to bed—  
You coming to my room—saying  
“How wide do you want the window?”  
Then bending low—kissing me—  
Turning at the door—  
Eyes brilliant with vision—  
And with your strong brown hand  
Blowing me a kiss to sleep.  
Then I sinking back  
Knowing I shall taste a rest  
Unutterably sweet!

## NEWSPAPERS

NEWSPAPERS circling in the wind.  
Newspapers torn and dirty,  
Trampled under feet,  
Flung aside.  
But perhaps somewhere on their sheets,  
For someone in the world,  
There is printed the beloved's name.

## RESTAURANT

### INSIDE

SHRILL hum of voices—forced laughter—  
Dimming the plaintive notes of violins.  
Warmth—glittering glare of lights  
Thrown back—  
Reflecting in a hundred mirrors.  
Women—gaudy gowns—flash of jewels on  
breasts—  
Hurrying waiter—overturned milk bottle—  
Discarded chicken—untouched food  
Tossed away.  
Bored faces—  
A woman yawns—life is not very gay. . . .

### OUTSIDE

SHRILL roar of the city  
Dimming the silence of the night.  
Cold—amber glare of city lights  
Thrown back—  
Reflecting on the streets.  
A woman in rags holding her baby to her breast  
Dreaming of milk—praying for discarded food  
Tossed away.  
Despairing face—  
The woman coughs—life is not very gay. . . .

## A BIRD IS LIKE FREEDOM

BEAUTIFUL are flags  
Straining—whipping in the breeze.  
But I say Freedom is more beautiful  
And not like flags—  
Which are ever held—restrained.  
Beautiful are trees—rocks—valleys—  
          mountains—flowers—  
But they are not as beautiful as Freedom  
And are bound to roots and earth.  
But I say a bird is like Freedom—  
Swift—light—beautiful—  
And soaring into the sky  
May die in high altitudes  
But perishes of its own free will.

## LEANING OUT OF WINDOWS

SQUALID, dark room—  
Torn, soiled wall paper  
With a broken cheap picture  
Hanging crookedly on the wall.  
Smell of greasy soup—cabbage—  
A tin tea kettle  
Spitting feebly from a small stove  
Where fumes of gas escape  
Stifling all the air.  
A disordered bed—  
Under the dirty sheet  
Three greasy children—  
Brows moist—feverishly whining—  
Beating away flies and mosquitoes.  
From the window,—  
Watching the elevated screech past  
The parents hang  
Gazing on the street.  
Far out they lean  
Like expert acrobats—  
For only leaning far out of windows  
Gives them balance  
And forgetfulness.

## CHURCH

### INSIDE

All kneeling  
From the same cup drinking wine—  
Blood of Christ.

### OUTSIDE

Spitting—chewing gum—cursing—  
The same lips that tasted wine—  
Blood of Christ.

## NOTRE DAME

NOTRE DAME—

Like a melancholy dreaming poet leaning  
against the sky

How much Paris owes to you.

How much owes to your slim fingers—

Ghost-like—tapering up—

Tenderly caressing

The dark velvet cloak of summer nights.

How much owes to the delicate network of lace

Worn across your face—

The mysterious color of everchanging rainbows

Sunk in depths of magic glass in the radiance  
of your eyes.

Paris owes this beauty all to you.

To you, music of your voice

The inspiration of peace and prayer!

## ECHOES

*(To my mother)*

A BIRD sings outside my window.  
I hear his notes throbbing like a heavenly  
pulse,  
Vibrating—clear.  
Suddenly he has stopped singing and flown  
away—  
But I still hear his song.

Your words are like that.  
You are dead  
But I still hear your words.

## THINGS I UNDERSTAND

IN the church

The priest is preaching a sermon—

The minister is preaching a sermon—

I do not understand what they are saying.

But I go out into the street perceiving

Shadowed patterns cast by the sunlight—

I see the grey chalk of hunger lined on the  
beggar's face—

The look of hopeless futility in the street-  
walker's eyes—

The glorious flame-like rhythm of a child's body

As it leaps in motion across the street.

These things I understand.

## MANHATTAN

FOREIGN cities have age and tradition  
to draw from—

You have only your youth.

But I love your youth

And the diversity of your profile

Outlined against the sky—

And your feet—ever wet—

Recklessly wading in the sea waves.

## NEW YORK

### DAY

COLD grey houses—ugly streets—  
Iron—steel—mud—  
Torn-down buildings—dust—dirt—  
Congested traffic  
Like swarms of mighty ants paralyzed together.

### NIGHT

Fairy city touched by stars  
With tall ghosts holding candles.  
Spirit of dreams with onyx shadows  
And the kiss of the moon across its face.

## NIGHT AND RAIN

*(Fifth Avenue)*

SLEEK streets—  
Pavements slippery—shimmering—wet.  
A slow drizzle—  
Distorted buildings  
Leaping from the greyness—  
Their edges sharp—strong—  
Then dimmed—lost.  
Amber signal lights  
With rays sucked through the mist—  
Changing green—red—mist again.  
Dark motors  
In funeral procession  
Proclaiming the mighty city's order—  
Creeping slowly along—  
Stopping—creeping again.  
While on the pavements  
Yellow reflections of lamps—  
Crimson blood spots of tail lights  
And black shadows of men and women—  
Apprehensive—hurrying along—  
Stripped of all personality  
With only their pale, white faces  
Showing them up—  
Reporting their existence  
From out the blackness of the night.

## TO MY MOTHER

You were so essentially yourself;—  
So true to all real things—  
Touched alike by beauty of soul and face,  
A rare flower of the old Spain.  
I know indeed  
I shall not see your like again.

## UNDERSTANDING

FROM out the congested crowd  
I see a tear worn face.  
Our eyes meet—  
Suddenly—  
Without a word we are comrades. . .

I have lost him in the crowd—  
But not before he has known  
I would like to have kissed  
His tear worn face.

## “SOYEZ RAISONABLE”

ACROSS the square a crowd—  
In the midst two figures—  
A woman dressed in rags—starved—drunk—  
A man dripping in poverty  
Helplessly trying to lead the woman home  
    who fights him off.  
In the witchery of the night these tragic figures  
Stand out in hopeless dignity of despair,  
While shadows of various emotions  
Chase recklessly across the face of the crowd.  
Suddenly a policeman appears—  
Well fed—fat—rosy—  
Dispersing the bystanders  
He jerks his belt across his swelling belly—  
With an air—pleased—satisfied—  
Twists his moustache to the crowd  
And to the drunken woman says—  
“Circulez Madame” et “Soyez raisonable!”

## BANNER, FLAME AND SONG

I WILL build a mighty banner with dazzling  
colors

Holding it high before me.

I will heap burning fagots on my shoulders

So that far away my flame will be seen;

I will sing a glorious song

Whose words and rhythm will always be the  
same.

On my banner will be inscribed the word  
“Freedom.”

My flame will be the star of Freedom;—

My song will ever be the song of Freedom.

## TO MY MOTHER

QUIET is your voice.  
Men say you will never speak again.  
Yet, is it not your voice I hear,  
Your voice vibrating through my heart  
Teaching me better than I am,  
Showing me humility and Love,  
Making me believe in God?

## CHANGE

SOME one for whom I had a great passion  
Now sleeps in this room with some one else—  
There are traces of me in many objects—  
The books I gave and fingered are lying  
    on the shelf,  
And an old picture whose land I lived in and  
    whose hills I sped,  
Is still hanging facing my old bed.

So times change—  
But love goes on—  
Like a bird that is dead  
Yet whose song,  
Lives on forever.

## MATERNITY

IN the Italian quarter on the East side,  
A woman trembles in pain delivering a baby.  
In the room four other children howl,  
While on her face is a look of hopeless resignation.

There is no haste to get well because it will  
all happen again.

Up town  
A woman trembles in pain from an abortion,  
There is haste to get well and it will  
never happen again.

## DAY LABORER

MASSIVE shoulders  
Convulsed with muscle—  
A bright red blouse  
Standing out like a scarlet wound,  
Across the breast of the snow.  
Easy swing and handling of the shovel;  
Brown face and hands  
Proclaiming warmer skies.  
Brown face and hands,  
Sad—alien—amidst Northern whiteness,  
And a voice and song that sing of  
Southern lands.

## STAMP COLLECTORS

(*Avenue Marigny*)

SITTING on the chairs

Their bodies curved and crooked—

Like ancient turtles crouched on jagged rocks—

The stamp collectors gather.

Old men—little boys—

Weird women—quaint, spoiled little girls

with wistful eyes—

All breathless and intent upon their business.

Through their fingers slip little squares of  
color—

Blue—green—red—gold—

New stamps—faded, old—

And rare ones beyond measure.

Fugitively they move—

These stamp collectors—

And with lustful eyes

Watch the bidding of their neighbors.

While sometimes—in their midst but all un-  
noticed

A stamp flutters to the ground—

Exuding the breath of alien people

And the romance of countries far away.

## TIDES AND CLOUDS

TIDES ebb, then come again,  
And with the last refrain  
Of the dying wave,  
I know I hear your name.  
Deep in the turmoil of the foam  
It seems to be;  
Borne across the water,  
Thrown back from out the sea,  
And at last striking shore  
And reaching me!

In the fringe and outline of the clouds  
I see your face;  
A drawn profile against the space  
Of Infinity.  
While in my heart the pain  
Forever and forever the same  
Of your memory!

## STRANGE CITY

O STRANGE city.

City wherein I am a stranger.

I look down at you from this high window

And watch the contour of your face

Pressed against the night sky.

I see a tower rising in the distance,

Pale, thin, with a faint light flickering

from its eyes—

Like a tired woman

Wearied with incessant clamoring of voices

she does not understand.

I see a clock whose face stands out

silvery and ghost-like,

Passing its slender hands across its face,

And feeling the breath of time as it slips

between its fingers.

I see black roofs

Like crouching beetles,

And endless streets

Fading into the night.

Then far away and deep within the distance—

Looms a corner of the sea.

Strange city with your harbor, streets and

houses,

I am lonely. Befriend me!

## MY CHRIST

CHRIST is roaming on the street,  
I feel His glance as I meet  
The passer-by. And yet they say  
Christ is dead and passed away.

I would not have Him living more to me  
Than this Christ I daily see;  
The love of Him in every ray of sun,  
The good of Him in each and everyone.

## GOOD-BYE ON THE BOAT

EARLY morning—

Rising.

A dead, hopeless feeling about my heart.

Going out—cold air on my face—

Crossing the ferry with the others

And at the boat

Finding you in the crowd.

Hundreds of faces—

Pushing humanity—

Staggering porters

Burdened with heavy luggage

Groping up the gangway.

Voices everywhere—

An onrush of meaningless—empty words.

Confused orders—repeated directions.

You and I standing in it all

Helpless—hopeless—

Trying to seem indifferent before the others,

And like the rest saying

Trivial—futile things.

A shrill whistle—

I calmly saying

“I think we had better go.”

Kissing you lightly—coldly—  
And with the others leaving you.  
Going off the pier  
My throat closed with pain—  
Eyes dim—staggering just a little.  
Then standing in the front of the ferry  
Trying not to seem crushed—  
With the confusion past  
The hideous realization  
That you have really gone  
Comes over me—  
The desperate regret  
For all the trivial things I said,  
And because I did not kiss you  
The way I wanted.

## INFINITE

If I should love you less  
You would still be my life.

If I should love you more  
I would have no need of God.

## LOST IDEAL

To have returned and found you changed.  
To have left you trembling from my touch—  
With smouldering fires in your eyes—  
Now to find your flame  
Burning at another's altar.  
Yet how strange—  
With this change  
No storm of jealousy rages me.  
Only a sad regret—  
That in all your words of fidelity  
Sworn so true—  
In our friendship now—  
So strained—so new—  
The truth stabs me—  
I am a finer thing than you!

## FAITHFULNESS

You are changed.  
I love you for your change—  
Your progress—mastering of yourself.  
But I do not love you the less  
For all you were.  
You must remember  
It was *that* you  
Whom I first loved.

## BRAVADO

You are forever tossing your glove  
Into the face of Life—  
Daring—challenging—  
Waiting with madness in your eyes  
For the returning blow.  
In reality—  
You are nothing but a small child  
Parading about  
On a little stage of your own,  
Longing for some one to love you.

## FUTURE HOPE

ONE day

There will be no such words as evil and good,  
While compassion—struggle will be understood;  
Pestilence—horror off Life's path steer,  
And flaming horses crush down fear.  
The Angel of Courage will ride this way  
Making blacker night and lighter day;  
Upholding love, slaying hate,  
Flinging wide the bolted iron gate  
That imprisons Freedom—kills all Light,  
Puts bars on windows—stops the flight  
Of all wild things. Then God coming with  
    burning eye—  
Tearing a jagged opening in the sky,  
Shaking the earth with fury layer by layer,  
Leaving only forgiveness—understanding there!

## AM I ALONE?

I AM alone—yet—

I feel I am not alone.

How do I know that a hundred unseen spectres

Are not pressing round me?

Or that a dear dead friend

Is not kneeling at my side

With lips touching my hand

And mutely trying to speak my name?

## REALITY

TONIGHT

Understanding has leapt between us.  
For the first time we have emerged together  
From out the mist  
And become real people to each other.  
O! how strange—  
The gate swinging upon this reality  
Found a knife within your hand  
To fling at me.  
Striking my heart  
It has not lessened your reality—  
But it has spilled blood  
Upon which—  
Some day I may slip.

## COMRADE

I AM gone beyond being your lover—your  
mistress.

That was when I did not understand Love—

Now I understand it—

And so, I am your comrade.

## FLOWERS, DEVILS AND SAINTS

I WOULD caution you only to be yourself.  
If you are a lily  
Do not paint your petals so as to be a rose,  
Or if you are a devil do not try to be a saint;  
Since you may find  
That devils are made mostly from the stuff of  
saints,  
And that roses lose their color  
Fading sooner than lilies.  
So I tell you again  
Be always yourself.  
Through being yourself  
You will convince  
You have a right to be yourself.

## AM I MYSELF?

THE world is passing through me.  
All life with noiseless key  
Turns the lock of my soul passing therein.  
Sometimes while sitting pondering  
Crossing the back of my brain  
A shadow passes.  
A shadow of some sorrow far away.  
Twisting my heart, I feel this sorrow more than  
they  
Who first created it.  
O tortured brain of mine  
That still is me yet can divine  
The anguish of all others;  
That must share day and night  
Sadness of the world and delight  
In joys I do not know.  
Am I some other self? If so—  
Am I myself, or am I but the wind  
Of all destinies that have been and still will be,  
Vibrations of sorrow and joy  
Expressing themselves through me?

## EXHAUSTION

If you should come to me tonight  
And say "I love you after all"  
Could I, who am so tired hear you call,  
Or would it not surely seem  
Just the echo of a dream?  
If you should come to me tonight  
And say "I love you."

## CRYING OUT

SILENCE—silence—  
Apprehensive stillness.  
Then from out the greyness of the night  
A sad prolonged whistle  
Like the frenzied wailing of a soul  
Twisted—deformed—despairing—  
Realizing all horrors  
Forever dreaded.  
Like the wailing of a soul—  
My soul—  
Crying out to you  
In the silence—apprehensive stillness  
And greyness of the night.

## INSATIATE

I AM not afraid of love—  
Nor am I afraid of its consequences.  
Only am I afraid that in meeting love  
I may remain insatiate—  
And the spirit still long for something greater.

## OUR RETURN

AFTER our wanderings

We have once more come back to your house.

I remember how last we saw it—

In a ghost-like mist of apple blossoms—

The moist lips of springtime pressing on your  
face.

Now we have returned to see the fruit.

Red apples—like flaming sunsets—

Trembling on the trees—

Dropping at your feet.

So in four long—short months—

I witness the whirling evolution

In the season's changing of your life.

Where I saw you gathering blossoms

I now see you bearing fruit.

The fruit of Truth—

And beauty of measured fearlessness.

## FUNERAL PROCESSION

A FUNERAL is passing.  
In the coffin  
Lies the body of a man or woman—  
The sex does not matter now—  
Since the soul understanding and sexless  
Has gone its way.  
Or perhaps it is in our midst—  
And watching the man who lifts his hat  
And bows his head so reverently.

## LOST FAITH

THE confessional is empty,  
Worn—mellowed—  
In glorious old colors  
Is the marble where the penitent has knelt.  
Slowly I approach and marvel  
At the place where I too once knelt.  
Then reverently approaching—  
(I—who no longer believe)  
Bend and kiss the marble  
Where those who still believe  
Will come and kneel.

## PARIS SLEEPS

PARIS sleeps,  
Encircled in loving arms  
Safely the wives rest in the night.  
While on the streets—  
Lonely and diseased  
The harlots march looking for their prey—  
And praying for the day!





Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.  
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide  
Treatment Date: Oct. 2009

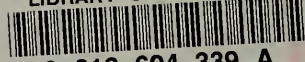
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